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1784

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**Abstract:** This article details the atmosphere surrounding the scientific community in France in 1784, the year of the Franklin Commission's report on Mesmer. The end of the 18th century heralded a victory of observation over systems and theories. Animal magnetism found itself in the midst of a conflict between the Old and the New World. The Franklin Commission, like so many other commissions at the time, was looking for measurable and quantifiable phenomena, the sole basis of progress in the health sciences. Mesmer and his system failed the test and were publicly denigrated. The Commission can be seen as the stepping stone to a more empirically based approach to the phenomenon of hypnosis, which would follow in the 19th century.

The ultimate good form in Paris is to be American in the city, English at the Court, Prussian in the Army, in one word anything but French.

L. S. Mercier, 1780

Visiting the apartment that the King had just left, I was quite amused to see all sorts of vagrants roaming about the palace without surveillance and this, even in the King's bedroom; I was, really, the only one asking myself how in hell they came to be there.

Arthur Young, a British tourist writing about his visit to Versailles (1792).

The palace (Versailles) had 226 suites, 452 bedrooms, all occupied and without any conveniences. Oh yes, one can say, this country smelled like s\*\*\* from afar.

Colonel-baron Fortuné Ocloff du Cap,  
*Memoirs of a Rich person*, 1790  
[as cited in Michel Folco (2001)]<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to find oneself in a more exciting place than Paris. Difficult also to imagine the climate of a city where scientists, artists, aristocrats, political activists and the ever present crowd of visitors and Parisians were struggling for a moment of glory on the public stage. A city of

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more than 600,000 inhabitants, Paris was at the crossroads that would lead to the Industrial Revolution. It was the era of the Encyclopedia and the Enlightenment but also of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Romanticism. Mesmerism became the epitome of the romantic idea that claimed a "return to Nature," an oasis of naturalism in a city that was overcrowded, polluted, and where social inequalities were more and more challenged. The Old and the New Worlds were colliding in these pre-Revolutionary years, and mesmerism attracted the attention of the medical establishment as well as the political one. It may even have been its more extremist political allies that finally convinced the authorities, in 1784, to attack it from a scientific viewpoint (Darnton, 1968). By identifying mesmerism with quackery and its proponents and supporters with charlatans, the government was refuting the new egalitarian mentality in an attempt to maintain the established order. This struggle was personified by Mesmer himself as he desperately looked for Royal support and admiration from the men of letters while claiming that mesmerism promoted social equality.

### PARIS, 1784

Laurence and Perry (1988) wrote that mesmerism might not have survived the 19th century had Mesmer not decided to move to Paris. But what was this city that attracted the young Viennese physician at the turn of the 18th century? It was a city of contrast, a city of change, but most of all a city that was attempting to cope with its uncontrolled population growth. It is difficult to portray the physical realities the inhabitants of Paris had to deal with in their everyday lives. The magic of contemporary cinema may have succeeded in creating in our imagination a romantic vision of the Parisian landscape at the end of the 18th century; reality was quite otherwise. Imagine a city with so many inhabitants but no organized sewer system, where all the remnants of human and animal day-to-day life ended up in the streets. Multiple-story houses were built around narrow streets. The streets did have gutters to collect all sorts of garbage but no sidewalks. Even if there was a law that required citizens to warn the passersby that garbage was thrown down, it was still perilous to walk along the streets. Of course, there were garbage collectors, but they mostly had the bad habit of dumping the collected garbage at the doors of the city. As if this was not enough, the pedestrians had to compete with horses, their horsemen, and carriages of all kinds that did not heed pedestrians. There was still no regulation for traffic, and accidents were numerous. The smell, the noise, the pollution of water and food, particularly at the heart of the city, was often unbearable. Even drinking and cooking water carried the mephitic smell that permeated the city. Wine was certainly a welcome alternative, as was perfume. At the end of the 18th century in Paris, there were more than 1,200 wig-makers hiring more than 6,000 employees. Mercier (1783), in his *Tableau*

*de Paris*, writes that the flour used to stiffen these wigs could feed more than 10,000 poor for a whole year! And there were many who did not have enough to eat.

It is also at the end of the 18th century that the King illuminated the Grands Boulevards and demanded that they be paved and edged by trees to purify the air. The first illumination of the Grands Boulevards took place on May 28, 1770, and thousands of Parisians flooded the scene to see this amazing event. Quite unfortunately, the crowd was so immense that hundreds of people died on that day or on the following days, trampled by horses and carriages or asphyxiated by the crowd. The Parisians were learning to live in a city that did not have the health care and social regulations necessary to prevent the negative consequences of such human and animal affluence. New discoveries in chemistry and physics drew attention to the importance of air quality and understanding the relationships between these new chemical elements found in the air and animal economy. The medical community was becoming more aware of a potential link between illnesses and putrid emanations. Each new discovery in chemistry (invisible gases in the air) was investigated for its potential link to hygiene. Eudiometric reports were collected from just about everywhere: hospitals, prisons, graveyards, the houses of the rich and the poor, etc. (see, for example, Schaffer, 1990; Sutton, 1981).<sup>2</sup> If it could be measured, then it could have a link to the general health of the population. In fact, in France during the 1770s, Lavoisier was a strong proponent of pure air. Paris, of course, did not escape scrutiny: Lenoir, *lieutenant-général de police*, demanded that scientists investigate the malodorous Cemetery of the Innocents. The report, presented to the Société Royale de Médecine, showed that the graveyard was eudiometrically foul and dangerous. The journalists satirized mephitism and eudiometry: "Parisian frivolity must enjoy seeing chemists decant air like thimblerriggers and then bring their olfactory nerves to bear on mephitized lavatory seats" (cited in Schaffer, 1990, p. 304).

It was a time when invisible agents were suddenly seen as potential carriers of good or bad health.

### SCIENCE AS A HOBBY

In this atmosphere, the aristocratic and the newly emerging educated class shared an unabated enthusiasm for literature, science, and politics. At this very important transition point in French history, between Illuminism and the Enlightenment, science (or at least its first murmurs) was the "hobby du jour." In this cultural maelstrom, Mesmer's arrival in Paris was one of the many intriguing events that the city welcomed at the time, maybe even more so as it became evident that the medical

<sup>2</sup>The eudiometer, a chemical test to measure the "goodness" of the air, was invented by Joseph Priestley in the early 1770s and improved upon by Marsilio Landriani, a physics professor in Milan, Italy. This instrument actually tested the amount of oxygen in the air.

establishment was rejecting and quite often ridiculing the proponents of the magnetic movement. In this pre-Revolutionary climate, popular support for people who challenged the establishment was easy to gain. Even scientific discoveries were applauded, because they represented an often dramatic change in people's perception of reality. If 1784 is a date most often linked to the Benjamin Franklin Commission of Inquiry into Animal Magnetism, it should also be remembered for an event that coincided with that report: the "discovery" of artificial somnambulism by the Marquis de Puységur, an event that will have as many repercussions for the development of hypnosis as the reports themselves. Is it really a coincidence that, in this time of upheaval, an aristocrat would suddenly discover the hidden wisdom sleeping in his peasants? It becomes clearer then why the Commissioners appointed by the King of France to examine the scientific status of animal magnetism also wrote a secret report.

When Mesmer left for Paris in 1778, the Viennese medical community had already rejected the theory that he could be channeling the magnetic fluid through his body and disseminating it to people and objects around him. It was not so much the theory of the fluid that the learned bodies rejected at the time, because the use of the magnet as a form of treatment was well accepted. It was more the idea that the magnets were not necessary to achieve healing. Already some scientists had proposed that the effects elicited by Mesmer were due to the imagination of his patients (see for example, Laurence & Perry, 1988). Ironically, in 1775, Mesmer himself had first concluded that the popular exorcist, Gassner, obtained his cures through the use of his patients' imagination, a conclusion that Mesmer will promptly revise once he has proposed his magnetic fluid theory.

Mesmer's tribulations in Paris were certainly embraced within high society, as it allowed for heated discussions and debates between members of the aristocracy. Mesmer's clinic at the Hôtel de Bouillon was in sharp contrast to the Parisian street. At the clinic, all was luxury, an oasis in the midst of the city's turbulence. It was decorated with carpets, mirrors, drapes, and tapestries—as well as zodiac signs on the walls—with music and soft lights. The common people could come for free around one of Mesmer's four *baquets* or be attached to a magnificent tree that he had magnetized a few steps from his clinic; the aristocrats and learned people had to reserve their places at the other three. Mesmer's clinic was as much a theater as it was a medical establishment, soon to attract the more libertarian thinkers.

As scientists like Lavoisier and Franklin went their way investigating nature, the upper classes, and most particularly the aristocrats, were making their way to the new scientific discoveries and elaborating their own theories of the universe. Mesmerism would even divide the Royal couple into two different camps: the Queen, Marie-Antoinette, would

support Mesmer, while the King would express his skepticism (that may be one more reason why the King asked for a Royal inquiry). Mesmerism was discussed in the cafés, the newspapers, and the salons. A few plays mocked it, and a few well-respected scientists published books to demystify the system. Among these, Thouret (1784) published his criticisms just before the Franklin Commission report in an attempt to discredit Mesmer's *esprit systématique*. The men of letters of the 18th century rejected any vision of the physical world based solely on systems and constructs. Only when a construct was validated by observation could one theorize about it. Thouret described in amazing detail how Mesmer's system was derived (if not plagiarized) from earlier systems of thought without any physical corroboration. He was preparing the field for the Commission's findings.

Nonetheless, Mesmer's magnetic fluid theory was certainly not an irrational idea at the time. Electricity, for one, was still the new wondrous discovery.

This matter of lightning, or of electricity, is an extream subtile fluid, penetrating other bodies, and subsisting in them, equally diffused. When by an operation of art or nature, there happens to be a greater proportion of this fluid in one body than in another, the body which has the most, will communicate to that which has least, till the proportion becomes equal; provided the distance between them be not too great; or, if it is too great, till there be proper conductors to convey it from one to the other.

This quote of Benjamin Franklin's reminds one of Mesmer's definition of the magnetic fluid found in his *Aphorisms* (1779). Franklin's quote was published in 1767 in a short letter entitled, "Of lightning, and the method (now used in America) of securing buildings and persons from its mischievous effects." The general public could experience for themselves the power of electric shocks with lightning rods and Leyden jars! Or they could witness the magic of chemistry where out of apparent thin air water appeared! And if this was not enough, why not take a ride up in a helium balloon in a Parisian park on a nice summer day? (See also, Darnton, 1968). Electric medicine had been recognized by the Medical Faculty following an investigation by a commission of seven doctors. The commission was created to investigate the curative value of the new treatment, and its report was published in 1783. The commissioners were so impressed by the healing virtue of electricity that they asked the government to confer on Le Dru (who practiced in Paris under the alias Comus) the title of King's scientist. Electric medicine then flourished for a while in Paris, with treatments ranging from "bathing the patient in a bath of electric fluid" to the administration of actual electrical shocks. Contrary to Mesmer's treatment, the observer could actually see this healing fluid, which made a world of difference. At the end of the 18th century, observations are more important than systematic theorization. One must see, one must be able to demonstrate the presence of a hypo-

thetical healing agent. Electrical healers could do just that, and it was sufficient to directly investigate the clinical usefulness of electricity. When the Franklin commissioners began investigating animal magnetism, they did not pay attention to its potential clinical usefulness because it had not been shown to exist. And when they failed to measure it, when they failed to observe it, magnetism reverted to being nothing but a system rather than an observable phenomenon. If cures there were, they had to be the result of factors other than the magnetic fluid.

This position is well illustrated by a passage of Franklin's letter to M. de la Condamine on March 19, 1784, accepting membership in the Commission:

You desire my Sentiments concerning the Cures perform'd by Comus (i.e. Le Dru) & Mesmer. I think that in general Maladies caus'd by obstructions may be treated by Electricity with Advantage. As to Animal Magnetism, so much talk'd of, I am totally unacquainted with it, & must doubt its Existence till I can see and feel some Effect of it.... I cannot but fear that the Expectation of Great Advantage from the new method of treating Diseases, will prove a great Delusion. That Delusion may however in some cases be of use while it lasts.

Or, as Bailly noted in the report (Franklin, et al., 1784): "Forced to renounce physical proofs . . . we cease to be scientists (*physiciens*) in order to be nothing more than philosophers (*philosophes*)."

And systematic spirit, as mentioned above, meant unsubstantiated speculations. The investigation thus shifted to "affectations of the spirit" in magnetized individuals.

On the other hand, in the public's opinion, Mesmer could very well have been correct in describing the marvelous healing effect of animal magnetism. Many of his patients, rich and poor, certainly acclaimed his healing power. His arrival and sudden popularity did not escape the notice of the famous Jean-Pierre Lenoir, the Paris police lieutenant-general. He was probably one of the most respected (and feared) men in Paris. His official functions were enormous, and his actual judicial powers feared by most, both aristocrats and plebeians. He was the one who supervised the road system, the illumination of the streets, and the general management of the city. He oversaw the different markets, hotels, guest houses, and the academies devoted to the art of the sword.<sup>3</sup> He also oversaw businesses, trades, manufacturers, not to mention the Jews, the Protestants, the Freemasons, the editors, and the newspapers. He also had the interesting task of identifying and prosecuting fortune tellers, sorcerers, mystics, alchemists, vagrants, and prostitutes. As if this were not enough, the moral conduct of the young aristocratic women was also

<sup>3</sup> At the end of the 18th century, duels, although usually outlawed, were still tolerated, and a number of rival schools were often confronting one another. The code of conduct was strict and death a rare occurrence. The schools were often the site of reunions of young disillusioned aristocrats.

under his surveillance. A busy man, indeed, and Mesmer certainly fell in a few of the above categories. Mesmer was not alone, however. Lenoir had investigated the infamous Cagliostro; Bleton, the water-diviner; and, in 1783, Comus, an electric healer who also practiced in Paris.

To assist him, Lenoir had under his command 48 judges, 20 inspectors, 390 counselors to the judges, and more than 1,100 guards, including nearly 300 horsemen. But this already impressive personnel staff was insufficient to keep him informed as to all that happened in Paris. He thus entertained a large network of spies from all social classes that cost him more than one million livres a year, more than half of his police budget. So, in an ironic way, the fact that he devoted so much attention to Mesmer and his movement was flattering and quite telling about Mesmer and the mesmeric movement's political, social, and moral importance.

Already in 1780, a mere 2 years after his arrival in Paris, Mesmer had attracted the attention of Lenoir. Many anonymous letters had informed him that seditious ideas about religion and politics were promoted by the mesmerists. But Mesmer had powerful allies in the Parliament, and Lenoir did not dare confront them at the time. He would have to wait until 1784, a few of these allies having passed away in the meantime.

#### FROM MESMERISM TO ARTIFICIAL SOMNAMBULISM

If the reports of the Benjamin Franklin Commission of Inquiry halted the development of the mesmeric movement (certainly helped also by the French Revolution), it is to the Marquis de Puységur that we owe the most dramatic changes in the practice of mesmerism. So dramatic, indeed, are those changes that his new therapeutic movement no longer deserved the name of mesmerism. All of its more recognizable hallmarks, such as the convulsive crises, crises chambers, baquets and their sumptuous decors gradually gave way to a simple dialogue between magnetist and patient. The magnetist listened to the somnambule as he or she revealed the inner workings of the body and the soul. The foundation of 19th-century suggestive therapeutics can be found in artificial somnambulism. If anything, the contemporary hypnotic movement should be grateful to the Royal Commissions that made way for this important transition. Not that it wouldn't have happened anyway, because the Marquis de Puységur had already developed his new system, but it offered to some of the mesmerian disciples a road to innovation. The next 25 years saw the development of four different approaches to Mesmer's system. First, there were the traditional mesmerists who continued to support Mesmer's system and promoted his physical approach. De Puységur's disciples, also called the "psycho-fluidists," had a more spiritual approach and proposed that magnetism unleashed the latent abilities of the soul without, however, appealing directly to spirituality or religion. De Puységur put forward that the will of the



magnetist was the source of his patients' abilities. Third, the spiritualists, like the Chevalier de Barbarin, emphasized that the magnetic influence was mediated by the will and prayers of the magnetist. This particular branch would evolve all through the 19th century into spiritualism, mediumship, and diverse forms of Christian movements that favored the belief in and practice of endorcism.<sup>4</sup> Finally and most importantly for contemporary hypnotists, in 1813, the Abbé de Faria and the "imaginationists," as they were called, proposed that neither the fluid, the will, or prayers were the basic elements of magnetic phenomena. Rather, they identified intrinsic factors, mostly the powers of imagination, in transforming the psycho-organic relationship in the subjects (Laurence & Perry, 1988; Méheust, 1999). In retrospect, the imaginationists may be the closest to those today who study the characteristics of the hypnotizable subject, hypnotized or not, and closest to the conclusions of the official report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry.

As we discover the Parisian life and its enthusiasm for new therapies at the end of the 18th century, we can recognize many of the same socio-cultural factors at play today in North America, factors that promote and even encourage unsubstantiated beliefs in pseudo-scientific therapeutic systems by both therapists and clients. Our attempt to understand the reasons why animal magnetism was so readily accepted and then rejected by the French people (both lay and learned) and, even more important, how it survived Mesmer and the Commission of Inquiry, may inform us about our own acceptance of fringe therapeutic movements. Why is it that in our postmodern technological society professional therapists still fall for pseudo-scientific theories and practices such as rebirthing, past-life therapies, primal-scream therapy, discovering the child within, etc., or, as Singer and Lalich (1996) called it, the alphabet soup for the mind and soul (EMDR, NLP, FC, NOT). Why, again, do therapists believe in fantastical tales like satanic conspiracies, patients with hundreds of personalities, and myriad extraterrestrial kidnappings? There are certainly no easy answers to these questions.

A tentative one, however, stems from the observation of those physicians of the late 18th century who could do little more than console their patients and rely on belief systems about health. When it came to treating illnesses, physicians had very little to offer. Ironically, as Laurence and Perry (1988) noted, in the report of the Royal Society of Medicine, a commission that was conducted contemporaneously with Benjamin Franklin's, the results seen in mesmerian clinics were not due to animal magnetism but to the patients' rest, exercise, abstinence from medication, and hopes for a cure! To daily confront the limits of one's, more of-

<sup>4</sup>Endorcism can be seen as the willful surrender of one's spirit to a higher one. This practice is more evident today in diverse charismatic movements or even in some aspects of Haitian voodoo practices and is part and parcel of what Ellenberger (1970) described as primitive healing techniques.

ten than not, inability to cure even the simplest (by today's standards) illness may certainly have been a difficult challenge for the heartfelt physician. A system that was so radically different, that did not have any need for useless and often harmful medication, was appealing. And patients claimed to be healed or improved! As Servan, a well-known judicial court member, wrote in 1784 after the publication of the Commission's report:

Physicians have killed me; what I have been left with is not worth looking for a more gentle word. In the last twenty years, I have always been rendered sicker by the medication I had to take than by my illnesses. . . . Animal magnetism, if only a chimera, should be tolerated; it would still be useful to my fellow man by preserving many of them from the undeniable dangers of vulgar medicine (cited in Laurence & Perry, 1988, pp. 95-96).

If today's medicine is less likely to be confronted by such an ordeal, clinical psychology and to a large part psychiatry certainly are still vulnerable. There is not any one single recognized way of treating clients, and even recognized treatments for specific problems are far from foolproof. Approaches abound, and treatment is often long and uncertain. Any new system that arouses curiosity and promises cures will attract its fair share of dedicated clinicians, even if most of the time there are only anecdotal reports of cure, an unfortunate resemblance to the *esprit systématique* of the late 18th century.

Mesmer was an excellent businessman and succeeded in marketing his secret; so are today's healers. Many critics (see, for example, Barrucand, 1967) accused Mesmer of exaggerating his successes in an attempt to sell his system. One has only to read contemporary books proposing new therapeutic systems to realize that this strategy is still the best one to attract customers—at least for a while. Confronted with a medical establishment that could not relieve their pains and, unfortunately, quite often created more, the French turned to a system that did not seem to induce negative consequences and sometimes helped them. Today, unfortunately, it may not always be the case.

The clash between Mesmer and the new 18th century science did nonetheless promote change. His followers noted the conclusions of the reports and modified their ways of using magnetism (see Laurence & Perry, 1988). If the fluid did not exist, then what was the active ingredient? It did lead to physicians such as Deleuze, Bertrand, Faria, Braid, Esdaile, Liébeault, and Bernheim, to name a few of those dedicated explorers of the mind who took the reports of the Commission seriously. Whether or not the Commission made mistakes or was influenced by politics might be, in retrospect, irrelevant. The reports initiated a movement that eventually broke the barrier between a system's approach and the scientific method. Their example is worth following. Only a methodical observation and analysis of any new therapeutic system can lead to a better understanding of the process of change or, as Ellenberger (1978)

wrote, "Today's progress can be erased by tomorrow's regression. Science not only requires effort to move ahead, but also, a sustained effort to insure yesterday's acquisitions" (p. 44).

The commissioners were merely pointing the way.

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1784

Jean-Roch Laurence

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Artikel beschreibt das in der naturwissenschaftlichen Gemeinschaft in Frankreich vorherrschende Klima im Jahr 1784, dem Jahr, in dem sich die königliche Untersuchungskommission mit Mesmer befasste. Das Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts verkündete einen Sieg der Beobachtung über Systeme und Theorien. Der animalische Magnetismus befand sich dabei im Zentrum eines Konfliktes zwischen der alten und der

neuen Welt. Wie zahlreiche andere Untersuchungsausschüsse der Zeit, suchte auch die königliche Untersuchungskommission nach messbaren und quantifizierbaren Phänomenen, der alleinigen Grundlage des Fortschritts in den Gesundheitswissenschaften. Mesmer und sein System hielten der Prüfung nicht stand und wurden öffentlich verunglimpft. Auf dem Weg zu einem stärker empirisch orientierten Ansatz bei der Hypnose, der sich im 19. Jahrhundert entwickelte, kann die Untersuchungskommission als ein wichtiger Schritt angesehen werden.

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1784

Jean-Roch Laurence

**Résumé:** Cet article détaille l'atmosphère entourant la communauté scientifique en France en 1784, l'année du rapport de la Commission Franklin sur Mesmer. La fin du 18<sup>ème</sup> siècle annonçait une victoire de l'observation sur les systèmes et les théories. Le magnétisme animal s'est trouvé au milieu d'un conflit entre le vieux et nouveau monde. La Commission Franklin, comme tant d'autres commissions alors, recherchait les phénomènes mesurables et quantifiables, base unique du progrès en sciences de santé. Mesmer et son système n'ont pas réussi ce passage et ont été publiquement dénigrés. La Commission peut être vue comme une marche à escalader pour une progression vers une approche plus empiriquement basée sur le phénomène de l'hypnose, qui pourrait alors suivre, au 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle.

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1784

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**Resumen:** Este artículo detalla la atmósfera circundante a la comunidad científica en Francia en 1784, el año del informe sobre Mesmer de la Comisión Franklin. Las postrimerías del siglo 18 anunciaron la victoria de la observación sobre los sistemas y las teorías. El magnetismo animal se encontró en medio de un conflicto entre el Viejo y el Nuevo Mundo. La Comisión Franklin, como tantas otras comisiones de su tiempo, buscaban fenómenos medibles y cuantificables, la única base del progreso en las ciencias de salud. Mesmer y su sistema fracasaron en la prueba y fueron denigrados públicamente. Se puede ver a la Comisión como el puente a un enfoque más empírico al fenómeno de la hipnosis, que lo sucedería en el siglo 19.

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